



## ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS IN LATVIA

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## DISSERTATION REVIEW: *LINDA LEITÄNE (PHD STUDENT, RIGA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY): ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS IN LATVIA*

REVIEWER: MAGNUS RÖNN

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### Introduction

The thesis is a very impressive piece of work. Linda Leitāne has found, systematised and analysed over one thousand architectural competitions (1080) in Latvia, in the period from 1860 to 2018. This is a story that has never been told before. She produces new insights and scientific knowledge on architectural competitions in Latvia, including regulations and the implementation of the winning designs. Latvia has a rich architectural history set within a complicated socio-political context. Linda Leitāne reveals this great story of competitions in architecture and urban design in her PhD project. The first architectural competition in Latvia was held in 1859 for the construction of the *Riga Miner Water Institution*.

The dissertation consists of two reports. The first is a summary in Latvian and English (Fig 1); The other presents, describes and analyses the competition proposals. This is the major part of the dissertation, comprising 221 pages, excluding appendices (Fig 2). This review is based on the English summary (p. 29–93) of the dissertation and discussions when the thesis was successfully defended at the Riga Technical University. Linda Leitāne has also presented her PhD project in conference papers, articles in journals and provided photos for the exhibition on architecture in Latvia, at the 2014 Venice Biennale.



Before I go further into the review, I would like to present a background to the PhD research on competitions in architecture and urban design. To the best of my knowledge, there are altogether twenty-six dissertations on architectural competitions including the thesis by Linda Leitāne. We can also find a number of ongoing PhD projects. The completed dissertations can be divided into two overall categories – studies from an architectural-historical perspective and investigations that look at competitions as contemporary productions of architecture and urban planning. The competition has been developed in Europe in three interconnected ways. Firstly, starting in France, it has been used as a pedagogical tool used in the education of architects for two hundred and fifty years. Secondly, it has been used as a method in architectural professional practice for over two hundred years, as regulated in the 19th century; and thirdly in the last thirty-five years as a field for doctoral research. The first PhD projects about architectural competitions were presented in the 1990s at universities in Scandinavia. Europe is central when it comes to the academic production of dissertations on competitions. Twenty-four out of the twenty-six theses have been conducted as PhD projects at universities in Sweden, Norway, England, Denmark, Switzerland, Brazil, Lithuania, Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Portugal, Finland and Latvia. Only two dissertations have been produced outside Europe – in Canada and Brazil.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view, Europe stands out as a strong player in PhD research on competitions in architecture and urban planning. However, it is not easy to get access to the research findings, since the dissertations in Europe are written in different languages (Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Portuguese, German, Lithuanian, Latvian and English). Half of the PhD students have chosen to communicate their research results with the surrounding society. The other half has produced theses in English in order to communicate on a global level. It is difficult to satisfy simultaneously both these target groups for research, at least for doctoral students outside the English-speaking countries. It is even more

Figure 1 (left)  
Front pages of the dissertation.  
PHOTO: MAGNUS RÖNN  
Figure 2 (right)  
Picture showing how competitions are presented in the dissertation.  
PHOTO: MAGNUS RÖNN

1 This number includes one licentiate thesis and twenty-five dissertations that either focus on architectural competition or have a major part discussing competition. Eight of the twenty-six theses on architectural competitions are produced in universities in Sweden (Jeper Blomberg, 1995; Rasmus Wærn, 1996; Leif Östman, 2005; Charlotte Svensson, 2008; Gerd Bloxham Zettersten, 2010; Stina Hagelquist, 2010; Jonas

complicated to bridge this language gap in architecture, where you often need a nuanced and well-developed vocabulary.

## Objectives and methods

Linda Leitāne investigates competitions in Latvia from an architectural-historical perspective. The subject of her dissertation is competition practice in Latvia from the middle of the 19th century (1860) to the beginning of the 21st century (2018) in typological and heritage contexts, including relevant regulations, and their influence on construction development. Architecture as heritage is understood as two different aspects, partly as built environment and partly as architectural knowledge. Implemented competition proposals, which thus become part of the built environment, can be studied “in situ”. The competition documents – briefs, design proposals and jury reports – represent an intellectual heritage for Linda Leitāne (p. 29). This knowledge can be made visible through studies of archives and exhibitions. I find this double understanding of heritage refreshing as a concept.

The subject of Linda Leitāne’s thesis is very broad in terms of its content. She investigates one hundred and sixty years of competitions in architecture and urban planning in Latvia. The research objectives are broad and are presented as four major points (p. 36), namely:

- analyse regularities of the development of architectural competitions in the context of Latvian architecture, history, socioeconomic and politics.
- identify architectural competitions in Latvia, compiling and systematising architectural competition projects according to their typology.
- analyse and systematise types of architectural competitions, their aims, tasks, results and the role of stakeholders, to reveal the significance of competitions in the construction process.
- evaluate the legislation and organisational practice of architectural competitions.

Linda Leitāne uses several quantitative and qualitative research methods in her study of competitions in Latvia from 1860 to 2018. Competitions have been identified through archive studies and investigations of published sources. The thesis also identifies competition rules and the demands of legislation. Competition programs, design solutions and jury reports are analysed and systematized by monographic and historical approaches. Statistics are presented in graphs in appendices (number of competitions, competition forms, competition tasks, clients, implementation and location of sites).

E. Andersson, 2012, Klas Ramberg, 2012), three are from universities in **Norway** (Elisabeth Tostrup, 1999; Birgit Sauge, 2003; Reidun Rustad, 2009), three are from universities in **England** (Torsten Schmideknecht, 2010; Paul Gottschling, 2015, Nigham Al-Qaysi, 2018), two are produced in **Denmark** (Peter Holm Jacobsen, 2014; Andreas Kamstrup, 2017), two are produced in **Switzerland** (Antigoni Katsakou, 2011; Jan Silverberger, 2011), one is produced in **Brazil** (Dos Santos Fialho, 2007), one is from **Litua** (Darius Linarts, 2011), one in **the Netherlands** (Leentje Volker, 2010), one in **Canada** (Carmela Cucuzella, 2011), one in **Germany** (Mathias Fuchs, 2013), one is from **Portugal** (Pedro MHS Guilherme, 2016), one is from Finland (Zheng Liang, 2016) and finally one is produced in **Latvia** (Linda Leitane, 2019).

Architectural projects from over one thousand competitions are visualised in the thesis by small illustrations of winning designs and through photos of implemented proposals. Site visits show the in-context transformation of winning designs into built environment. This documentation of one thousand competitions represents very extensive and time-consuming research. Latvia has a very interesting, and until now, unknown culture of competition practice in architecture and urban planning. This makes Linda Leitāne's PhD project important. New knowledge is presented on a neighbouring country. However, I have some critical comments on how the research methods are described and communicated in the dissertation. There are no literature references on methods, nor discussions about the chosen methodologies, nor how they are related to research questions and objectives. The short paragraph on methods in the thesis is too short and too simplified, in my opinion. The methodology appears therefore undeveloped in the dissertation.

### Structure and content

The thesis is structured in four chapters, a conclusion and seven appendices. The chapters present architectural competitions in chronological order. The basic principles for competitions have been the same during the investigated period – a client describes the task in a brief (program) and competitors (architects/design teams) develop solutions to the design problem at the same time. A jury then points out a winner. The architectural competitions in Latvia since the middle of the 19th to the beginning of 21st century have taken place under very different politico-economic circumstances. Latvia has been part of Russia and the Soviet Union as well as having had two periods of independence. Its complicated history has influenced economic development, competition regulations where power, politics, and economic conditions in society have affected both the practice of competitions and competition rules.

Linda Leitāne's chronological analyses of competitions show a culture with four different phases. The first phase is from 1860 to 1914 when Latvia was a part of the Russian empire. The second phase is the proclamation of independence between 1918 and 1940. The third phase is from 1945 to 1990, in which Latvia was a socialistic republic within the Soviet Union. The fourth phase is from 1991 to 2018, in which Latvia has been restored as an independent nation. In all four phases, clients have organised *open competitions*, *invited competitions*, as well as *international competitions* and *competitions on a local level*. They have been held for both projects and ideas. Competition documents are in the German, Russian and Latvian languages. The reconstruction of the competitions has been complicated, since data in the archives and publications are often fragmented regarding submitted proposals, competitors, invitations, competition tasks, jury reports etc.

The typological analyses in the dissertation focus on the competition tasks. Linda Leitāne has identified fourteen different functional types, from competitions on urban planning, residential buildings, industrial building and warehouses, offices, administration buildings, schools, cultural buildings, hospitals and healthcare buildings, buildings for cultural activities etc. Half of the competitions have been conducted in Riga. The thematic analyses deal with the socio-economic conditions and political tendencies during the four phases and their impact on competition practice. These analyses include alterations in competition regulations and the consequences for the culture of competitions.

## Phase 1

During 1860–1914, the competition culture is German. In 1867, the Riga Technical Society (Rigaer Technischer Verein) adopted the Berlin Architects Association's rules regarding architectural competitions. The rules regulated open competitions for architects and contractors, the composition of the jury, the content of the competition programs, the distribution of prizes, etc. Linda Leitāne has found and analysed fifty competitions in this period. Seventeen (33%) concern cultural buildings for museums, theatres, music, etc., and ten (20%) are for administrative and office buildings. Thirty-three (66%) of the identified competitions have been implemented. A majority of the competitions (90%) are organised as *open competitions* in Riga, commissioned by state institutions (66%). Public clients had a strong interest in competitions run by the state. Some competitions in this period were conducted in cooperation with the Riga Architects' Union and the Riga Technical Association.

## Phase 2

During 1918–1940, altogether sixty architectural competitions are identified. In 1934, new rules were introduced by the Latvian Union of Architects entitled *Good practice in Latvian Union of Architects' competitions*. The competition culture is now more nationally oriented. Several competitions paid tribute to the new Latvian independence. This applies to twenty-two competitions (33%) announced for administrative and office buildings, marking the political position and consolidation of power for the newly established state. Fifty-nine invitations are calls for *open competitions* and of these, twelve (20%) are organised as international competitions. This finding can also be seen as a demonstration of freedom, and the seeking for new designs appropriate to independence. A majority of the competitions (80%) are commissioned by public clients (state and local government institutions), associations and financial companies. Twenty-two (33%) competitions are implemented. The rest are "paper architecture". Also, in this period, competitions are held in collaboration with the Latvian Union of Architects.

### Phase 3

During 1945–1991, when Latvia became a part of the Soviet Union, the competition culture changes. However, the number of competitions increases: three hundred and fifty competitions in architecture and urban planning take place in Latvia during this period. About one hundred seventy-five (50%) are organised as *open competitions*, which in this case means open for architects and builders in Eastern Europe. However, only thirty-five (10%) are implemented, mostly for memorials, administrative buildings, offices, industrial buildings and tourist buildings. Policies in this phase supported the entry of new kinds of public clients as organisers including state institutions, city executive committees, public industrial enterprises, collective farms etc. In 1961, the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR decided upon a legislative act entitled *On competition procedure in architecture*. The law stipulated that project commissioners should plan and design competitions in cooperation with the State Construction Affairs Committee, the Latvian Association of Architects and the Artists' Union of Latvia. In 1965, another act was introduced by the government called *On organizing competitions for the development of individual projects for unique buildings and complexes*. The Soviet's regulations determined the organisation of competitions in Latvia until the end of the period. In this phase, the architects' association in Latvia seems to have had a strong influence on competition procedures and culture. The low number of implemented proposals makes the competitions appear more as the design of "paper architecture" rather than the production of architecture as built environment that can be experienced by citizens in situ.

### Phase 4

During 1991–2018, competition culture again changes dramatically as a result of the restoration of Latvia's independence. The building sector became more market oriented. We see a similar transformation in Sweden. In addition, the global financial crisis of 2008–2010 had a huge impact on competitions in architecture and urban planning in Latvia. Rapid economic growth stopped. Linda Leitāne describes the alteration from public to private competitions; the new regulations that affect both the Latvian Association of Architects and competition practice for architects. Despite the economic crises, the number of competitions increases during this fourth period to five hundred and eighty. Half of them are private competitions and half are organised by state and community administrations. Public clients no longer have the same dominant role as before. Four hundred and sixty-four (80%) are calls for *open competitions* and one hundred and sixteen (20%) of the competitions are *invited competitions*. Fifty-eight (10%) invitations are announced as *international competitions*. In one hundred and sixteen (20%) cases the winning proposals are implemented, primarily religious buildings, medical and healthcare buildings, industrial buildings as well as transport and communication projects. As a result of state crises, a limited number (20%) of the residential building competitions have been realised. (see Figure 3 and Figure 4)



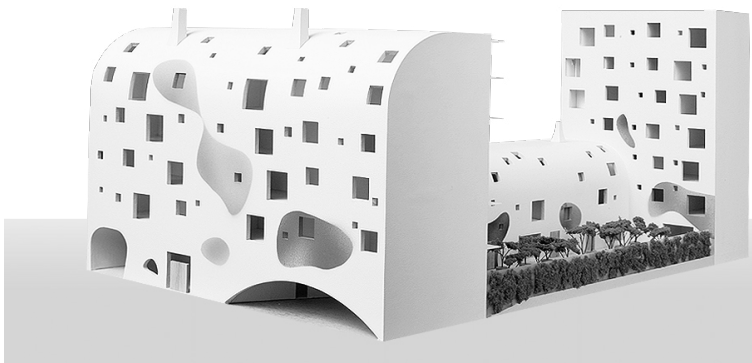


Figure 3  
Apartment building, Competition  
proposal from 2016. Winning design by  
JKMM, 2006.

SOURCE: ILZE RUKMANE-POČA AND LINDA LEITĀNE-  
ŠMĪDBERGA, RIGA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY.



Figure 4  
Competition for a hotell 2016. Winning  
design by Silis, Miķelsone. And Ģelzis  
(artist).

SOURCE: ILZE RUKMANE-POČA AND LINDA LEITĀNE-  
ŠMĪDBERGA, RIGA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY.

In 2004, Latvia entered the EU. From this date, the EU rules for Public Procurement have to be applied to all public competitions. Of equal importance are changes to privately organised competitions. The regulation of private competitions at a national level disappeared in 2014 when a new law on construction was introduced. Until then, depending on legal requirements, competitions had to be held in cooperation with the Latvian Association of Architects. The association has partly lost its influence in the field of architecture, including competition procedures, over the last decade. Alternative competition types have emerged at the turn of the millennium. These are called plenary or workshop competitions and are applied in invited urban planning competitions, probably as a response to market oriented culture in the building sector. Over the last decade, competition programs and design solutions have changed and been adjusted to prevalent, unstable market conditions. In 2010 and 2017, in response to the unclear conditions for competing architect firms and design-teams, the Latvian Association of Architects presented renewed competition rules entitled: *Regulations establishing good practice in competitions. Recommendation and Competition Best Practice Guidelines*. Through her work at the Latvian Association of Architects, Linda Leitāne has directly promoted and developed the guidelines for architecture competition practice outlined in the thesis.



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